

2. "Categorical imperatives" vs. "counsels of prudence"

Kant argued that, contrary to what Aristotle maintained, doing one's *moral* duty is a different kind of activity than striving for one's own happiness. For Kant, to do one's duty is to follow moral *rules*, and moral rules are always *absolute commands*. For Kant, moral rules are commands that apply to *everyone* in *every situation*. If "treating one's neighbor with respect" is, indeed, a moral rule, then *everyone* must treat his neighbor with respect. And every person must do this in *every situation* that presents itself. Every person must abide by this moral rule even if her neighbor is a vile creature who tortures cats and refuses to brush her teeth regularly and even if she does not feel like treating this neighbor with respect. Moral rules are what Kant calls "categorical imperatives," i.e., they are commands that must be followed by *everyone* in *every situation*.

Thus, according to Kant, it follows that Aristotle's "moral philosophy" is not really about morality at all. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* has few, if any, absolute commands or "categorical imperatives." In Kant's view, Aristotle only puts forward "counsels of prudence" or general rules of thumb that experience has shown commonly result in human happiness. Aristotle, as noted earlier, had maintained that a person *must* acquire virtue if he wanted to achieve happiness. But is it true that virtue will *always* lead to happiness? How does one know that being virtuous will not result in the loss of one's job, leaving the virtuous person destitute and homeless? How does one know that treating one's neighbor with respect will lead to happiness? What if one's neighbor not only tortures cats but also people, and the one who tries to treat his neighbor decently ends up severely beaten or even murdered, as has happened to countless Christian martyrs in the past? And might it not be the case that being vicious, at least on an occasion or two, will actually make a person happier in the long run? Human happiness is just too uncertain to provide grounds for moral rules. No one knows beyond a doubt what will make him happy, let alone what will make the entire human race happy. How many lottery winners eventually end up broke and miserable? And how many cancer patients oddly enough end up describing their illness as one of the best experiences of their lives? One would have to be God to know precisely what steps he would have to take at every turn in his life to achieve happiness. Therefore, Kant argues, moral rules cannot be the same things as rules that make a person happy, as Aristotle had argued. Moral rules confront us with the demand "Everyone must follow me, no questions asked!" But guidelines for becoming happy make a much milder claim, "Sometimes some of you should follow me, but not always, for every person and every situation is a little different." Thus, says Kant, moral rules are a wholly different creature than Aristotle's counsels of prudence.

3. Happiness cannot be the foundation of morality

But even if reason were a reliable guide for achieving happiness, Kant further argues, and even if we were sure enough of the path to our own happiness to be able to issue absolute rules for being happy, we would still have to ask ourselves a number of questions: Is happiness *always* good in itself, as it would have to be in Aristotle's system?

Is happiness really the foundation or basis of the moral life? Do we really regard the happiness of other people *regardless of how they have achieved it* as being good? To all of these questions, Kant would respond, "No!" As he observes, "The sight of a being who is not graced by any touch of a pure and good will but who yet enjoys an uninterrupted prosperity can never delight a rational and impartial spectator."¹⁵ Happiness itself is not always a good thing; indeed, it seems to make evil people even more evil if they are enjoying themselves while they perform their wicked deeds. For example, the press following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, laughing with released a video of the mastermind of the attacks, Osama bin Laden, laughing with his fellow terrorists about the destruction and death he helped to orchestrate. No one of good will would view this man's happiness as a good thing; indeed, the fact that he has taken pleasure in his deeds almost makes him diabolical.

For Kant, then, happiness cannot be the anchor that secures the laws of morality. For Aristotle, happiness or human fulfillment is the greatest good, and everything else, like courage or friendship, acquires its goodness because it leads to, facilitates, or partially comprises human happiness. Courage, for example, is of value in Aristotle's system in large part because human fulfillment does not seem to be possible without it.¹⁶ Difficulties and even tragedies are an unavoidable part of life, and if one is not equipped with courage, he will be easily discouraged and overrun by misery. In other words, courage is necessary for happiness, but in Aristotle's theory, it does not seem to have value apart from happiness. Courage only shines by reflected light; happiness alone is luminescent. Within Kant's system, however, if a moral agent performs a courageous act, that act is good in itself, whether or not it lead to happiness.

So, if Kant is correct that happiness is not always a good thing, then there must be a different source of goodness in the world. But, if it is not happiness, what could the source of all goodness be?

C. A GOOD WILL IS THE BASIS OF MORALITY

"There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a *good will*,"¹⁷ writes Kant. Whereas Aristotle believed happiness to be the end of the moral life and that toward which all of our actions should be directed, Kant maintained that having a good will is the only thing of intrinsic worth anywhere in the cosmos...or even beyond it. When Kant states that a good will is "good without qualification," he means that a good will is always good in itself, regardless of what might follow from it. For example, Aristotle believed that courage is a virtue, but according to Kant, courage is not good "without qualification" or not good in itself. For example, a terrorist who undertakes a suicide mission is all the more dangerous if he possesses courage, and thus, courage is only good *if* it exists in a person with a good will. Likewise, a tyrant, such as Adolf Hitler, could only have come to power and maintained his position *if* he had intelligence and charisma, and thus, intelligence and charisma are only good *if* they exist in a person with a good will. Indeed, as the example of bin Laden above